Project-Based Learning Using Multimedia

Kathryn Kohl

For many years I have heard the name “Edutopia” followed by the words “What works in public education” on WBUR underwriting snippets. Often I have said out loud, “Oh sure.” I would wonder fleetingly how George Lucas would know what works in public education. So I have enjoyed finally exploring the Edutopia sight and watching videos on some things that clearly do work in public education.

It was inspirational to see and hear students in the process of finding their own maturing voices. I was also interested in Marco Torres’s comment about taking his experience in local politics into San Fernando High School in order to help students and the wider school community to learn how to harness what local officials have to offer them. It seems to me that the San Fernando Education Technology Team (SFETT) was about raising consciousness about a wide variety of subjects and themes and practical, multimedia-based ways of learning about them, and – in turn – raising others’ consciousness. Particularly impressive was the fact that all students who participated in SFETT went to college, and many returned to help teach others the technical skills that they had learned from SFETT.

It was disheartening, however, to learn that Torres no longer teaches at SF High School, but has become an educational consultant instead. I tried to find out what Torres is doing now and found references to several conferences (including one run by Alan November, who lives in my town) but no dedicated website. Perhaps he is reaching a wider variety of people now, but I could not help but feel that his former students, and those coming from behind, deserved someone – if not him – in that role. So the fact that SFETT no longer exists is quite depressing.

I found making a Podcast last Thursday a humbling experience. My group experienced time-consuming technical problems related to our computer, and in my opinion our production suffered as a result. In hindsight, I believe our planning could have been better as well, and of course I take my full share of responsibility for that. I saw that I was able to learn from the greater technology expertise of my two group members. Although I understand – and see in my work – that collaboration is critical, personally I have not had as much *fulfilling* experience in *true* collaboration as I would like. (Last year, in particular, I worked with an intransigent non-sharer, and I saw every day how my own teaching practice – as well as hers – would and should have improved through regular collaboration.) Watching the Podcasts of the other groups, I began to think that merging the best parts from each would result in something quite interesting: the introduction and instructional tone of one; the well-organized images connected by arrows to show the butterfly’s life cycle of another; and the importing of additional images and creative use of voices from another. Nonetheless, I learned enough from the experience to try making another Podcast, this time taking more time to sort through any problems and to fashion a combination of voice and visuals that I’m satisfied with. After I do this, I believe I will be able to teach my students how to do the same.

This year I will be supporting struggling readers in classrooms rather than in pullout groups. I don’t yet know what that model of instruction will look like or how successful it will be in comparison with my work last year. I know I won’t have the independence that I had, and certainly no magic wand; neither do I know what resources will be available. However, I am certainly interested in talking to teachers about helping my students – and all the students – work on multimedia projects such as Podcasts. The majority of the students are English language learners, and I believe project-based, multimedia projects will help me to differentiate the literacy curriculum for my struggling readers and writers, and help them to find their individual voices and increase their competence as readers, writers, and speakers in a collaborative context.